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Although many factors lead students, particularly the culturally disadvantaged, to avoid reading, among the most significant reasons are an abhorrence of the kinds of readings contained in their English anthologies, and the physical characteristics of these books. If the schools are to encourage reading as a broadening experience, they must furnish students with interest-provoking materials which are easy to read at those places where their reading is normally done--on buses or at lunch counters, for example. One technique for improving the teaching of literature would be for the school to give each student, every year, 10 inexpensive paper back books of literary quality, yet of interest to them. These paperbacks are easily read in the student's natural reading situations, are comfortable to hold and transport, and could be marked by the student without fear of recrimination from the school. In addition, the student would begin to feel a pride in the ownership of books, and these books might become the first step in making reading a vital part of the life in culturally-disadvantaged homes. (DL)

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Articles are invited and should be submitted to the editor. Manuscripts should be typewritten and double-spaced. Deadlines for copy are November 1, February 1 and April 1.

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THE PRIDE OF OWNERSHIP

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Those of us who teach English generally love to read and regret deeply that we do not have more time to do so. We find it perplexing perhaps that some of our students, especially those from disadvantaged households and backgrounds, have never really sampled the diverse joys of reading which we have experienced time and again. We sometimes find ourselves dealing with students who positively and emphatically won't read; and even if we manage, through such negative motivation as pop quizzes to get them to read, we feel defeated because we know they are approaching the printed page as though it were a sort of punishment rather than a clear window open on the many worlds which man is unable to experience personally.

Why do some students love reading and others hate it? The answers to this question are endless, but we must consider at least some of the salient problems which we face in trying to get students to read willingly and excitedly. To begin with, it is evident that visual defects are in part responsible for a reluctance to read on the parts of some students. Annual or semi-annual eye tests should be conducted routinely in public schools. The correction of a visual defect can change the course of one's whole academic life.

We all know, however, that in the course of a year we meet many students who have 20-20 vision and would rather do anything than read. In part, age accounts for this: Reading is a sedentary activity, and few adolescents are sedentary. If they read willingly, most teenagers will choose to read action-packed works with whose protagonists they can identify. They will also be more easily attracted to books with short chapters than with long and to short novels which can be read at a sitting, such as *The Old Man and the Sea*, *The Pearl*, *Shane*, *Catcher in the Rye*, or *Chita*, than to more extensive works, even though there are some exceptions to this rule, the most notable recent one being Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*.

It is my firm conviction, both as I think back on my own student days and as I currently view the teaching of literature in schools throughout the country, that the overage high school literature anthology does more to kill one's desire to read than any other single force operating in English education today. Two fundamental problems are immediately present in many anthologies: (1) they are too heavy and cumbersome to read comfortably and (2) they are printed on glossy paper in double column pages. Regardless of what is contained in the anthology, the very form of it is often repugnant, especially to youngsters from disadvantaged situations who often must do their school work on the run or under the most adverse physical circumstances. The ideal that each youngster in a family have his own study area within the home is not yet a reality for those whose backgrounds are essentially lower or lower-middle class economically. We cannot change this basic fact.

Further, most students from such backgrounds have never been used to being around people who read; some of them come from homes in which they will be "first-generation" readers and in which even such rudimentary books as a dictionary are not available to them. They may find that in their home situations reading will be viewed as a waste of time and that to sit and read will evoke the ire and bring about the derision of those about them. Most youngsters from such homes will, if they read at all, have to do so to the counterpoint of a blaring radio or

television; and, because many such youngsters must work after school, they will often be forced to do their reading and other school work when they are physically exhausted and virtually unable to concenrate.

Yet, when these youngsters appear in our classes, we often forget what the odds against them are in their quest for education. We perhaps assume he smug attitude that if they really wanted to do something with their lives, they could. We reflect on the rugged individualism of the Horatio Alger period and conclude that these youngsters, who are given all the advantages of an affluent society, just don't have what it takes to capitalize on the benefits that are available to them. And it is just this attitude, regardless of how tempered and veiled it may be, that eventually leads droves of students to drop out of school every year.

It is by no means my contention that the English teacher can single-handedly prevent students from dropping out of school. I do contend, however, that the English teacher may be the one who leads the drop-out to make his ultimate decision. The English teacher, more than anyone else in the school, is dealing in his teaching with value judgments about society. If his judgments reflect, even momentarily, scorn for the social situations from which many of his students come, he has bombed the road down which he is trying to lead his students.

When one is teaching literature to those whose interests and outlooks are not essentially literary, he must bear in mind one fundamental premise: Literature has universal appeal. Everyone likes a story, and a story is essentially a literary phenomenon. Television daily brings dramatic literature into the homes of people from all walks of life, and these people voluntarily watch television, the literary level of which may legitimately be questioned, but which represents, nevertheless, a literary medium.

People tell stories; and the less literate such people are, the more structured and changeless do their stories tend to be, for the illiterate must depend upon his memory much more than his literate brother does. People love their stories, their folk legends; and all of these are a form of literature. Such literature is less remote than that on the printed page and, therefore, appeals to a wider audience than books do.

The student who hates English and daily proclaims his aversion to reading, very often does more voluntary reading than we would imagine. He has the skill required to read printed materials, however simple they must be to stay within the limits of his skill, and he generally exercises this skill rather fully. He reads the newspaper or those parts of it which interest him. He reads directions when he is trying to perform a task, he reads a wide sampling from the plethora of sensationalism with which hack writers fill every newsstand; and he does this without the threat of a pop quiz or a low grade.

What is it that such a student seeks in his voluntary readings? When we have answered this question, perhaps we will be in a better position than ever before to begin building his attitude towards reading (as well as towards life) in such a way that he will eventually be better able to make his way in society.

Most students regarded in school as reluctant readers will, when they are reading voluntarily, read from materials which are easily portable. They prefer newspapers which can be folded up and stuffed into the pocket of a jacket, books with soft bindings which can be slipped into a back pocket, or small magazines which can be rolled up and put into a pocket. This type of reader seldom sits at a desk or table to read; more typically he will read in a public conveyance, in his car, draped over a chair at home, or sitting at a counter in a cheap restaurant. His high school anthology would hardly serve him well in such reading situations; yet these are the sorts of situations in which he has grown accustomed to doing most of his reading.

What does he look for in his reading? Essentially the student who has grown up hating the literature we have tried to

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teach him wants adventure and excitement in what he reads. He does not shrink from brutality but finds in it a verisimilitude which is soft pedalled by most English teachers. Again, the cultural gap becomes apparent; students from disadvantaged backgrounds are generally much more exposed to brutality and to the realities of life than are the people who teach them. When these students come to school, they find immediately that they are in the midst of a class conflict and that the more powerful class is in the opposite camp. This discovery makes the disadvantaged student resentful, suspicious, and defensive. His reaction is completely normal, but for many of us completely unacceptable.

The student who is negatively disposed towards literature is generally an immature reader who prefers to have his prejudices upheld by what he reads. The literature to which he voluntarily exposes himself generally is in agreement with what he believes. Quality literature often challenges what he believes and, as a result, he feels threatened. As teachers we try to help him see the need for diversity of opinion. Quality literature also contains subtle currents and undertones which the immature reader may vaguely feel but not understand. It is part of our function as teachers of English to help him to realize that one can read a book on many levels and that it is not disgraceful to read something on a purely literal level if this is the best one can manage. The important part in human development comes in moving ahead from where one finds himself at any given point in his education.

Were I to make any single recommendation about the teaching of literature, I would have no hesitancy in recommending that school districts move as quickly as possible towards allocating funds for the purchase of paperback books which would be given to all students. This may seem like a drastic and impractical suggestion. However, when bought in quantity, paperbacks are not expensive. By using them widely, as here suggested, the English curriculum would have a flexibility which is not possible when the usual anthology is the major source of reading material in an English program.

I feel that paperback books should be given to students so that they can experience the pride of owning a book. Many of the disadvantaged do not know this feeling, as incredible as that may seem to those of us from happier circumstances. The student who is reading his own book can mark it up as he goes along, and this is the way a book should be read. Also, were students given books, these books would be brought into virtually bookless homes in many cases and eventually reading might become a more vital part of the life in such homes.

Were each student given ten paperback books a year at an average wholesale price of thirty-five cents a book, he would have a substantial quantity of reading material at his disposal. The cost to a school district would be greater than the present cost of books, but the overall results might more than compensate for the added cost. In some states the purchase of paperbacks would necessarily be financed exclusively from local funds since state funds are often allocated specifically for the purchase of hard bound books from an approved list. However, state funds could be used for other books which would still be needed, and no state money would likely go unused.

As we move ahead into an age when man's mind must be increasingly developed if he is to survive in his society and contribute to it, the expenditure of $3.50 per student per annum seems indeed a small price to pay when compared to the benefits which such an expenditure would bring about.

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